

James McCrea House
108-10 Sansom Street
Philadelphia
Philadelphia County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1440

HABS
PA,
51-PHILA,
564-

PHOTOGRAPH

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

ADDENDUM
FOLLOWS...

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REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

JAMES MCCREA HOUSES

HABS No. PA-1440

Location: 108-110 Sansom Street (formerly Norris Alley), Philadelphia, Philadelphia County, Pennsylvania.
USGS Philadelphia Quadrangle. Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 18.487720.4421670

Present Owner: Old Original Bookbinder's Restaurant
125 Walnut Street
Philadelphia, Pa., 19106

Present Occupant: Vacant for about ten years; demolished September 1984

Significance: The James McCrea Houses were attached twin middle-class late 18th century residences with their original fabric largely intact and unaltered by modernization including rare-to-find intact twin frontispieces. The cellar of 110 housed a commercial brick bake oven, one of the last of its type in the city. The houses' location at the east entrance to Independence National Historical Park made them a highly visible introduction to the historic area and an important element of the streetscape.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1798. The Philadelphia 3rd Survey District file (manuscript) for the block contains a 1797 survey of the property which suggests destruction of the previous buildings in that year. The 1798 County Tax Records for Walnut Ward list an "Empty house & nearly finished," and the Federal Tax record of the same year shows two identical buildings.
2. Architect: Not known; probably designed by the builder, likewise unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners of the site:
 - ca 1704 Deed book E3, vol. 5, p. 212, located at the Bureau of Land Records, Division of Archives and History, Harrisburg, Pa.
Samuel Carpenter to Arthur Holton
 - 1715 Will no. 38, City of Philadelphia Register of Wills (Ms)
Arthur Holton to his daughter Mary: dwellings, bakehouse

- 1765 Deed 26th August (not recorded), 3rd District Survey of 1797, Philadelphia City Archives
Wm. Pusey et Uxor to Robert Hopkins
Robert Hopkins to Thomas Hopkins (not recorded)
- 1780 Will no. 276
Robert Hopkins to his heirs
- 1790 Sheriff Sale Deed, Book C4, p. 181, Philadelphia City Archives
Thomas Hopkins to Samuel Coates: dwelling, bake-house, bolting house, lot
- 1794 and thereafter until 1945, Philadelphia Historical Commission
Samuel Coates to James McCrea, his descendants and their in-laws
- 1945 James A. McCrea, Jr. to Robert Griggs and Viola h/w
- 1961 to Viola Griggs by right of survivorship
- 1964 to Viola F. Cousin, daughter
- 1976 The recent troubled history of this property may be summarized as follows: The Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia together with the Independence National Historical Park, agreed upon a plan for the block from Front to Second, Chestnut to Walnut, and including the McCrea Houses. Under its goals the intent was to conserve still-existing historical buildings "to minimize the impact of a new parking garage on the rest of the block."
- Feb.,
1981 Philadelphia Authority for Industrial Development sold the McCrea Houses to Albert Taxin, Old Original Bookbinder's Restaurant (\$200,000, no demolition of historic houses permitted, \$50,000 to be used for improvements).
- Aug.,
1982 John Taxin, Albert's father and the restaurant's owner, submitted an application to the Philadelphia Historical Commission to demolish the McCrea houses. No action was taken as the Philadelphia Authority for Industrial Development was still involved in the 1981 agreement sale and therefore still held title.
- June,
1983 Philadelphia Authority for Industrial Development lifted the restriction against demolition as part of a settlement of a controversy over a new hotel to be built on Walnut Street which would take parking spaces from use by Bookbinder's.

July,
1983

John Taxin, a member of the Philadelphia Historical Commission, sought for a second time to obtain a demolition permit from the Historical Commission.

Aug.,
1983

A six-month demolition delay was voted by the Philadelphia Historical Commission. At this time "The Committee to Save the McCrea Houses" was formed. Fundraising for documentation and feasibility studies was initiated. Alternate use plans were drawn and distributed to potential developers, and attempts were made to market the properties. A series of development schemes for the surrounding parking lot was worked out with the help of the City Planning Commission. Research into the history of the site was printed and distributed. Throughout the entire period various members of the Committee negotiated with the owner and his attorney in an attempt to demonstrate viable alternatives to demolition. The Regional Office of the National Park Service offered to accept the houses if donated, with attendant tax advantages to a long-term leaseholder as incentive for rehabilitation. A detailed pro forma was produced.

Meanwhile, recording of the structures proceeded with the cooperation of the owners. Funding for the drawings was provided by a grant from The William Penn Foundation. Photography was made possible in part by Independence National Historical Park, and in part by contributions from private individuals. Historic research was a volunteer project. Although the block on which the McCrea Houses stood had been designated a protected area (Old City Redevelopment Area, Unit No. 2, by the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Philadelphia; Area F by Independence National Historical Park), in an agreement which forbade demolition of historic structures, neither the Redevelopment Authority nor the Park chose to use its powers of condemnation.

Charles E. Peterson, realizing that commercial baking had been done on the site for nearly 300 years, suggested that the houses should be recognized as landmarks of that great industry. As early as 1730 the construction of bakehouses was regulated in Philadelphia (with which ordinance the biscuit oven in the cellar of 110 Sansom Street complied). The export of baked goods overland to the frontiers, and for ships' stores and products of maritime trade, was essential to the economy of the city, as it was to the grain and flour milling industries of the surrounding counties.

Mr. Peterson contacted the Senior Director of Public Relations of Nabisco Brands, Inc., at Parsippany, N.J., with the proposal that the company consider developing the site as a national landmark. This was taken under advisement in the highest echelons, but eventually the company failed to embrace the idea. Their decision came too late to approach another baking company.

When all persuasions finally failed, a suit initiated by the Committee was filed in the August Term, 1984, in Common Pleas Court by ten preservation-oriented groups and nearby property owners, which claimed to show abuse of authority.

Although the judge granted a temporary injunction, the \$200,000 bond required to make it effective could not be posted, and so, after the rescue of the most important architectural details for the Independence Park Architectural Study Collection, the houses were demolished for approximately ten parking spaces.

4. Builders, suppliers: Unknown.
5. Original plans and construction: No original plans have been found. Physical evidence in the brickwork and rafters clearly established that the original roofline was a half-gambrel. Each house was self-contained and had its own kitchen on the first floor of the back wing.
6. Alterations and additions: The front part of the gambrel was raised to form a shed roof and additional headroom on the fourth story sometime before 1867 (see Part III. B.). A doorway was then opened through the party wall between the two garrets.

The kitchen fireplace in 110 Sansom was sealed up and the trimmer arch broken through by a flue from a commercial bake oven added or reconnected beneath it. Later, the fireplace itself was changed to be a warming oven and eventually sealed up altogether.

The common masonry wall between the two kitchens was removed, and a load-bearing beam inserted at ceiling height, to create one large room; date unknown. This opening was later covered over with a wooden plank wall, probably in the late 19th century, judging from the circular saw marks on the boards.

B. Historical Context:

The McCrea Houses were built in 1798 as twin rental properties for James McCrea, a wealthy immigrant merchant whose own residence was located nearby at Front and Sansom Streets. The site had previously contained a dwelling, bakehouse and bolting house possibly dating to 1715 or earlier. It has been established through wills, inventories and tax records that Arthur Holton and the Hopkins family were all biscuit bakers who conducted their business at that location off and on until 1794.

These earlier buildings were removed from the site by 1797, three years after James McCrea bought the property. McCrea, an Irish-born Scot, was a gentleman and shipowner who, among other pursuits, imported Irish linen. His son John, one of ten children, who inherited the 1798 houses, took over his father's business, and by 1828 was one of the largest shipowners in Philadelphia. City directories show that he used the McCrea Houses as his business address in 1818-19 and again from 1847-52. In the intervening years financial reverses turned him from the sea to extensive real estate development in the Rittenhouse Square area. His son John Alexander, one of twelve children, became a physician. John A.'s son James became president of the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1907. His son Archibald was the last private owner of Carter's Grove Plantation, near Williamsburg, Virginia. The McCreas retained ownership of the twin houses through all these years, until Archibald's son, James A., Jr., sold the properties to the Griggs family in 1945. Thus, for the first time in 147 years, the houses were owner-occupied, and continued so until the death of Mrs. Griggs in the early 1970's, after which time they were abandoned.

Some of the earlier residents of the McCrea Houses have been found in City Directories, Tax Records and Census Reports, and this information is included in the supplemental section. In general, occupancy during the first 32 years was single-family. By 1840 the density had increased markedly, and multiple-family use continued until at least the end of the century with the increasing commercialization of the neighborhood. Sansom is the most recent of at least four names for the street on which the McCrea Houses were located. From approximately 1850 to 1906 it was known as Gothic Street; from approximately 1750 to 1850 as Norris or Norris's Alley; and before that, from 1692, as Hooten's and Carpenter's Alley. Prior to 1854, when the city numbering system was changed, there was some confusion as to how to number two houses on the site of one dwelling (the bakehouse had no address). One finds "2 and next," or "2 and 4," even though there already was a No. 4 to the west.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The McCrea Houses were unusually complete late Georgian style twin party-wall dwellings with matching gouge decorated frontispieces (now in the Independence National Historical Park [INHP] Study Collection -- Accession 3493), fine balustraded stairways, an original kitchen, and a commercial brick bake oven in one of the cellars. Located in the oldest part of Philadelphia, they were a highly visible introduction to the National Park and a charming remnant of the early streetscape.
2. Condition of fabric: Ten or so years of neglect (i.e., open or missing windows in the backbuilding of 108) had taken their toll in falling plaster and rotted floorboards, but basically the structures were sound, and were so ruled by building inspectors of the City Department of Licenses and Inspections in the spring of 1984. Four fireplace mantels had been removed.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Lot size 48' x 29'. See plans and elevations on sheets 1-7.
2. Foundations: Rubble stone, with some brick.
3. Walls: The facades were first-quality uniform molded red brick laid in Flemish bond, with projecting brick belt courses. Steps and cellar window lintels were of Schuylkill blue marble. The eastern wall was a mixture containing salmon bricks laid in common bond. The back wall was obscured by the interior wall remaining from an abutting 19th century building, and the others were covered with stucco.
4. Structural systems, framing: The exterior, party and connecting partition walls were brick, load-bearing. Interior partitions were hand-split wood lath on studding. Wood floor joists spanned the interior spaces and tied into the masonry walls. Chimneys and stairways were headed off using mortise and tenon construction.
5. Bulkheads: Each cellar had once had direct entrance from the front, but the bulkheads and steps had been removed and the openings filled to grade with cinder blocks.
6. Chimneys: There were four brick chimneys, all flush with the exterior walls. Those at the east and west sides of the front-buildings had 4 flues each; those at the rear of the backbuildings had 3 each. See sheet 4. All had foundations with arches in the cellars. These were of brick, except for that of the 110 front-building, which was of stone and brick. See photograph.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Original paired pedimented fanlight frontispieces with 8-panel doors on the facade; one simple doorway on the side of each backbuilding; all wood. See sheets 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10.
- b. Windows and shutters: Original wood single hung windows with top fixed sashes. 12 over 12 lights on the first and second floors, 8 over 8 on the third and fourth floors and backbuildings, 6 over 6 on the side and back of the fourth floor. Wood plank-front frames. See sheet 5. Four pair of original 3-panel, vertical sheathed wood shutters on the first floor fronts of both houses.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Shed with wood planks and tarpaper. Rafters re-used from the original half-gambrel. See photographs.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Originals missing.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Each of the attached houses had a front- and back-building making an L shape plan from the cellars through the third floors; the fourth was a continuation of the frontbuildings only. The plans are mirror images of each other, with the frontispieces, halls and stairways side by side. There were two rooms on each floor, for a total of fourteen, not including the two in each cellar. See sheets 2, 3, and 4. The ceilings in the backbuildings were lower than those in the frontbuildings.
2. Stairways: One in each house from the cellar to the fourth floor, straight-run with winders, and square balustered hand rail with turned newels with newel drops. See sheet 7 for section, sheet 8 for details.
3. Flooring: Cellar: brick paving. Above grade: wide pine boards, unfinished.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Walls: plaster directly on brick. Ceilings and partition walls: plaster on hand-split lath. Original plaster cornices in both first front rooms. See field notes for section.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Most had original double-architrave trim and (damaged) 6-panel doors.
- b. Windows: Original cove back band trim.

6. Decorative features and trim: First floor front rooms: breast closets, baseboards, outline traces of mantels and chair rails; cast iron firebacks and jams. First floor rear kitchens: 108 Sansom - original mantel, beaded corner trim and upper dresser (cupboard); traces of all of these in 110. Second and third floor rooms, front and back: original chair rails and baseboards; original mantels in all but second front of 108. Both third front rooms: original closets. All trim was pine. See sheets 3, 4, 5 and 7.

7. Hardware: Front doors: large butt hinges. Shutters: wrought iron strap hinges, bolts and acorn-topped pintles. Interior doors: butt hinges.

8. Mechanical equipment:

- a. Heating: Fourteen fireplaces in two houses; no central heating. A 19th century warming oven inserted into the kitchen fireplace of 108 Sansom.
- b. Lighting: Minimal gas and electric in the cellar and first two floors.
- c. Plumbing: Modern outhouse with drainpipe to sewer. The 1797 survey shows a privy pit at the rear of the alley to the east of the houses.
- d. Special feature: Commercial brick wood-burning bake oven in the cellar of 110 Sansom. See sheet 2, photographs, field notes.

D. Site:

- 1. General setting: The houses faced north on Sansom Street, a narrow alley which had been converted by the Park Service to a landscaped walkway. To the west of 110 Sansom was a 10½' wide alleyway. Each house originally had a small walled backyard at the southeast and southwest corners of the lot. Surrounding these properties is a large parking lot, of which the McCrea Houses site has now become a part. To the west of the parking lot is the site of the Slate Roof House built by Samuel Carpenter, now marked by Welcome Park commemorating William Penn's residence there.

2. Outbuildings: The aforementioned concrete block privy.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Architectural Drawings: Original unknown.
- B. Early Views: Photograph of the Slate Roof House on Second Street, looking east down Sansom Street (Gothic Street, Norris's Alley). The McCrea Houses with their later shed-roofed profile, and the older houses to the west of them, can be seen in the distance. Photographer: Gutekunst. Date: 1867. Size: 8" x 10". Location of negative: Historical Society of Pennsylvania. INHP neg. 157.2806 G.
- C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

3rd Survey District file for the block Walnut-Chestnut-Front-Second Streets, Philadelphia City Archives. The 1797 survey for James McCrea includes some notes about the former structures and the chain of title prior to 1790. See supplemental material.

Wills and inventories from the City of Philadelphia Register of Wills:

Arthur Holton	1715 no. 38
Robert Hopkins	1780 no. 276
James McCrea	1814 no. 113

Deeds, City of Philadelphia Department of Records

Sheriff Sale Deed, Book C4, p. 181, Philadelphia City Archives

City Directories; City Trade Directories: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, American Philosophical Society Library

State and County Tax Records for Walnut Ward, Philadelphia City Archives: 1769, 1774 (microfilm); 1777-1800 (books TX 168 and 169)

1841 State Tax Assessment Ledger, Walnut Ward (book TX 251), Philadelphia City Archives

Federal Tax of 1798, Independence National Historical Park (microfilm)

Constable's Returns, Philadelphia City Archives

Hannah Benner Roach Note File of newspaper references, American Philosophical Society Library

Society of Friends Records, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

United States Census Reports

Archeological Survey Report, Area "F" base maps, Independence
National Historical Park

2. Secondary and published sources:

McCrea Family geneology, Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, published by
the Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Scharf, J. Thomas, and Thompson Westcott, History of Philadelphia,
Philadelphia, L. H. Everts & Co., 1884

Hazard, Willis P., Watson's Annals of Philadelphia, Philadelphia,
E. S. Stuart, 1898

D. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

Insurance surveys: There is no evidence that the McCrea Houses were ever insured by the Philadelphia Contributionship or the Mutual Assurance (Green Tree) companies. Three other files unavailable at this writing are the Insurance Company of North America (CIGNA) archives, the Franklin Fire Insurance records located in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (note: John McCrea had insured at least one other of his buildings with them), and insurance records in the Germantown Historical Society.

Photographic collections

Diaries and journals

Newspapers not covered by the Hannah Benner Roach file

E. Supplemental Material:

Field Records

Xerox of 1867 photograph

Copies of two plans from the 3rd Survey District files

County Tax Records, 1791-1800

Residents of Norris's Alley in whole or part, 1800-1850

4 data pages from the Philadelphia Historical Commission

Reduced copies of the rubbings made from the firebacks and jambs

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Measured drawings (11 sheets)

James S. Collins, Architect

Penelope H. Batcheler, Historical Architect, Independence National
Historical Park (consultation)

History: Ellen Miller

Photographs:

George A. Eisenman, James L. Dillon & Co., Inc. (7 8" x 10", July 1983)

Thomas Landon Davies, Independence National Historical Park (29 4" x 5",
October 1983)

Marie Carbo (printing)